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A Lumber Missionary in Central America

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Armed with that most necessary and important of all credentials, a vaccination certificate, and orders to make a survey of the Central American market in the interests of west coast lumber, the writer landed at Puerto Barrios, Guatemala, in early January of 1928. In only a most innocent way could I have been as happy as I was to leave the good old United Fruit steamer from New Orleans, for, while the next three months' experiences were to be ones of interest at all times, they were also to be ones in which I experienced many kinds of travel, all bad.

Representing a lumber exporting firm as I did, the use of lumber in any form was to be carefully studied. Although the eastern sections of British Honduras, Guatemala and Spanish Honduras produce considerable quantities of fine cabinet woods, they do not produce much structural lumber. This necessitates the annual importation of many thousands of feet of southern pine and cypress each year for general construction. Naturally, the fruit companies are the greatest importers, their government concessions permitting such goods to enter free of duty. These countries, with ideal conditions of temperature and humidity to encourage decay, also have a severe enemy in the termite or white ant, which is particularly partial to pine. It is no uncommon sight in office buildings using pine ceiling to find each desk shielded from above with a canopy hung from the ceiling. This shield catches the digested wood droppings of the termite, which fall like a shower of fine sawdust. My attention was first called to such destruction when a 2 inch length of 1x4 t and g longleaf ceiling dropped at my feet with a peculiar hollow sound. Upon examination the piece proved to be a shell thin as paper, nearly transparent, and sound with the exception of one corner where the termites had entered.

The most resistant of commercial woods are native mahogany and cedar, and California redwood; the last now being imported to the east coast for the first time. This is made possible through the sawing of redwood at certain southern pine mills. These logs are brought from California by boat to supplement the supply of pine until second growth will be available. With redwood as the most resistant against both time and termites, special effort was made to encourage its use, thus the reason for the following.

With Puerto Barrios as only a stop-over enroute to my first destination of Puerto Cortez, Spanish Honduras, it offered a few days of exploration and study as a preliminary to my experiences to come in the next three months. The first was my initiation into the national pastime of hammock fever, a most necessary exercise in the tropics. However, I succeeded in curbing the disease long enough to make a short trip to the capital at Guatemala City, the only large city of the country. The trip from the coast is made via a narrow-gauge railway, and while only a distance of 200 miles, it nevertheless requires some 12 hours time and considerable patience and endurance. With Puerto Cortez as representative of the swampy coast settlements, one passes through the damp jungles and banana plantations into the rolling barren hills, out into the semi-desert and finally into that now-dormant-volcanic portion where lies the sprawling city of Guatemala, the capital of the country. This is a country of much history, home of those ancients, the Mayas, who left those interesting ruins which even a lumber missionary will remember. There are two major volcanoes, Agua and Fuego. These are now extinct, but in their day of destruction, covered the ancient capital of Antigua, lying at their feet, with tons of water and lava, killing thousands and covering many churches whose beauty and history are typical of the days of the early Spaniards. Both volcanoes had been consecrated by the padres and taken into the church to prevent their acting unruly. Contentment reigned, then came the fateful quake and disturbance which opened both craters, permitting the destructive forces of fire from one and water from the other to merge on the city of Antigua. From that day Guatemala City has been the capital,

as the 40 miles separating the two cities is sufficient to provide greater assurance from earthquake damage.

The few days permissable were spent in initial survey preparatory to my return later on. Here one finds certain quantities of Douglas fir and redwood being imported through the port of San Jose on the west coast. The fir is being used mostly in the larger sizes by the railroad, and the redwood in particular in thin ceiling and boards of smaller dimension in limited quantities for general construction. All worked lumber is especially crated for protection as the double handling from lighters necessitates rough care.

In certain parts of the interior large stands of native pine are to be found, but since market conditions do not permit the installation of modern logging and sawmill equipment, one finds very quaint methods used. This pine is very resinous, resembling our own longleaf pine in that respect, but fails to compare favorably in durability and strength. In the smaller mills one finds a most complicated system of native measurement, which is necessitated more by the small size of the log than by quality. As the natives are of a very poor class, their only tool for cutting is a crude axe with which they fell, trim and square the log. It is of such a character that the so-called square looks more like

Squaring Mahogany at Belie, British Honduras.

it had been chewed or gnawed into shape. Seldom were native squares found that would measure 12 inches, the average being from 4 to 10 inches and never more than 12½ inches long. After squaring, the native hews a small hole through one corner of the log close to the end in which he inserts a hand-made rope. Then with oxen he proceeds to snake the square down out of the hills to his two-wheeled cart. Here one or two of these short squares are loaded and the long, slow trip of many miles to town begins.

At the smaller mills one finds many varieties of equipment, all of which are bad. It is sufficient to say that with poor wood to begin with and worse equipment, they are not justified in grading their miserable product. Consequently it goes on the market green, ungraded and none too consistent in size. In contrast to these smaller mills, one finds larger ones in other portions of Central America, such as in eastern Nicaragua. Here the product is of such manufacture as to be able to compete with that from the States in both Central American markets and in the home market in certain cases. Here again it is best recommended only after being put through a preserving process, because of its poor durability.

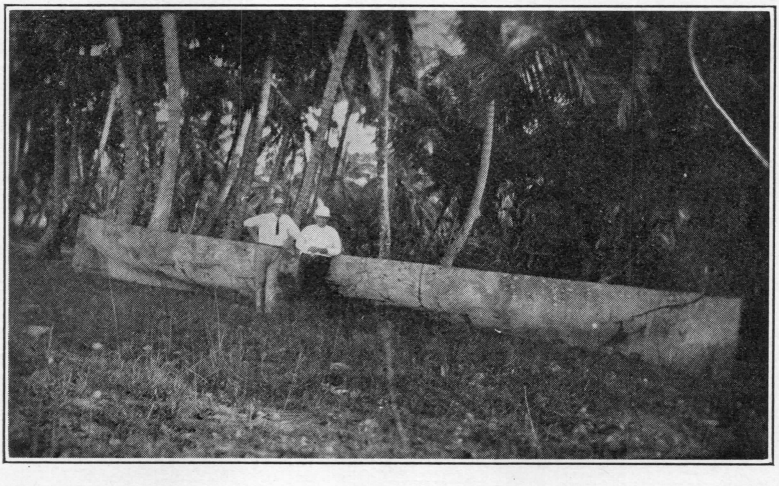
But to return to Puerto Barrios, and my first degree initiation in travelling in Central America. I arrived at the port eight hours late, occasioned by a wreck which held us up most of the night on the cold desert. No torture could be more appropriate to serve as a reminder of my initiation. To those that doubt me, I suggest their trying a seat in a Guatemala first class coach for comfort. To add insult to injury, I had to leave the same day for Puerto Cortez, Honduras, on a former submarine chaser, now converted into a coastwise carry-all. On this there was one cabin with nine bare bunks, three on each of three walls. Here I had the following native companions, 2 women, 3 men, 2 children and a dog.

I arrived at Puerto Cortez to find it impossible to get ashore. In my hurry to get away from Puerto Barrios I had neglected the formality of securing the commandants permission to land. Here Lady Luck approached me in the person of our representative, who cleared the matter up with a sleight-of-hand movement so prevalent in those parts.

Spanish Honduras is perhaps the most unsettled of all Central American countries, due primarily to poor communication. With Tegicugalpa, the capital, in the interior, remote from all commerce, it is no wonder they are subject to the periodic revolutions so customary in the country. Fire-scarred buildings, damaged property, corrugated tin roofing with bullet holes, ceilings riddled by machine gun bullets, all bear witness to the unsettled conditions. Honduras exemplifies the axiom that wherever one finds poor communications, there will you also find unstable government. To overcome these obstacles, the United Fruit Company uses a Ford plane for traveling to and from the capital. It is approximately three hours trip by plane from their plantations on the coast to Tegicugalpa, but by road it is closer to a three day trip. Travel along the coast is slow and very tiresome through a combination of water and rail. The latter means perhaps the riding on a mixed train of freight and passenger cars that may find it necessary to cover the entire rail system, switches included, before one reaches the next transfer point. Here was another in pirate lore. In an auxiliary sailboat without cabin facilities and with a mixed passenger cargo we headed for Coxen Hole, former home of Lafite and his pirate crew. We arrived late, and to our sorrow found no hotel facilities in the village. Here we imposed upon our good customer to the extent of his confiscating a bare bed for the two of us from an employee. After a cold night of torture in fighting sand flies, we prepared to charter a boat for the trip to the adjoining island of Utila, but were saved the expense when another converted sub chaser came into port on her way to our next destination. This was the most pleasant and outstanding of all my travels. To a novice, as I was, the warm, clear, blue waters with schools of sail fish breaking through the spray was my first conviction that the tropics were desirable in at least a few respects. But oh! the innocence of the initiate. After landing at Utila and concluding our business, we settled down in the little hotel for what we believed would be our last night of fighting off a combination of starvation and sand flies. But lo! The second degree was administered in one of the most severe storms that hit the Caribbean that season, causing our stay-over for three days, and, above all, my missing the regular once-a-month passenger boat from

Ceiba to Belize, British Honduras. This necessitated the retracing of my travels to Cortez, where I caught a big German freighter back to Puerto Barrios. Aside from having to sleep on the bare dining room table without cover of any sort, the trip was uneventful.

While awaiting for the weekly boat to Belize, I made a trip up the coast to Livingston, the chief port of export for coffee on the east coast. Due to shallow water, all loading is done by lighter, and when it involves bananas it is quite a laborious job. I succeeded in catching a ride on a launch to Livingston, but my business carried me past the time of the return of the boat, leaving me stranded and facing my third degree. Briefly, it consisted of a ride in a native cayuca or canoe propelled by a one-cylinder gas engine, and whose chief cargo was seven pigs that kept up a constant squealing due to the waves washing over the frail



Native Canoe 40 feet long, 5 feet wide, hewed from a solid mahogany log.

craft. I no doubt presented quite a picture, curled up around the anchor rope on the front, the only place that the waves did not reach. Altogether it was not so desirable for a night on the open sea.

At last came Belize and Englishmen. Here one finds the source of a great percentage of the world's mahogany. Not alone does it come from British Honduras. Because of topography, a

vast amount comes out of the province of Copan, in Guatemala, is driven through Honduras and concentrated for squaring and export in Belize and other smaller ports. Contrary to general belief, mahogany trees occur in small isolated groups in very dense jungles. This necessitates the use of tree hunters, who locate the trees and in some cases contract to clear a road to bring them out. After assembling at the river awaiting high water, they are rafted to the coast, in many instances a distance of several hundred miles. Only a small percentage of lumber is manufactured in Belize, the majority being exported in log or square form.

From Belize I retraced my route through Puerto Barrios to Guatemala City in time to witness the cruelest of sports, a bull fight. Then I went on to Salvador, the most up-to-date and Americanized of all Central American countries. The trip by auto was very eventful, as the route was over a road which would hardly qualify as a fire trail in the United States. However, the starting at two a. m., fording rivers and having the pleasure of seeing your luggage submerged, due to a broken spring, loss of the front wheel, and other minor details such as periodic inspections by soldiers, provided thrills to last the 14 hours necessary to cover the 200 miles. From Salvador I had planned on going on down to Panama, but tropical fever had sent our representative back to the States and it was necessary that I return to New Orleans for the time being.

Following the advice of a more experienced New York drummer, who first travelled those countries 25 years ago, and had found the five day mule pack trip of that time more desirable than the present auto trip to Guatemala City, I embarked from Acajutla for San Jose, planning on taking the train back across the country to the east coast from that port. Here Lady Luck deserted me, for the boat, contrary to schedule, but typical of the country, passed up San Jose to go to Champerico first, a port close to the Mexican line. This meant the loss of a full day's time in returning to San Jose Junction by rail. Fortunately, my boat was delayed in sailing and with an ever increasing appreciation for good food and water I found myself on the way home, sold on the one idea that one forester in particular will never wander from home any more.